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Article published Sep 12, 2003

Harbor dumping tied to closure plan

ST. PETERSBURG -- State environmental officials want to close part of the troubled Piney Point phosphate waste water site in Manatee County as early as November.

That goal helped drive the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to sharply accelerate the dumping of polluted water into environmentally sensitive Bishop Harbor last weekend, a Florida Department of Environmental Protection manager said Thursday.

Engineering consultants have advised the state it would have to dump a lot more water faster to begin shutting down the storage system while maintaining space for rain from a tropical storm or hurricane, DEP manager Phil Coram said.

The fastest way to get rid of the water is to partially treat it and dump it in Bishop Harbor.

"It's not something we wanted to do; it's something we feel like we have to do to close down the system," Coram told a community group formed to protect Tampa Bay.

Coram said the DEP aims to double the amount of water dumped from Piney Point over the next three to five months, to an average of 4 million gallons per day. The total includes discharges of up to 2 million gallons per day of treated waste water into Bishop Harbor, a cove on Tampa Bay's eastern shore.

Coram's comments made it clear that the emergency order the DEP issued last Friday was driven as much by the agency's long-term goal of closing the Piney Point site as the short-term threat posed by Tropical Storm Henri.

The DEP had indicated last week that the potential for several inches of rain from Henri required the abrupt resumption of discharges into Bishop Harbor, which had been suspended in July because of concerns about environmental impacts.

The renewed Bishop Harbor dumping didn't sit well with some members of the Agency on Bay Management, which includes representatives of fishing groups, scientists, government agencies and other interests.

Earlier this year, the DEP had sought the group's support for its plan to dump the Piney Point water in the Gulf of Mexico. The DEP justified the Gulf disposal largely by arguing that Bishop Harbor would be susceptible to harmful algae growth and other problems from the waste water dumping.

"Some of us are upset that it's going to Bishop Harbor," said committee member Jan Platt, a Hillsborough County commissioner told Coram. "It's sort of a bait and switch."

The DEP took over management of the former phosphate processing site more than two years ago when the owner, Mulberry Corp., went bankrupt. The cleanup has cost the state more than \$40 million for Piney Point and another Mulberry site in Polk County. Closing both sites is expected to cost another \$120 million.

The DEP dumped about 300 million gallons of Piney Point water in Bishop Harbor this year

until a barge began hauling the waste water more than 120 miles into the Gulf.

Some group members expressed frustration that the state "unilaterally" decided to resume the Bishop Harbor discharges. And they questioned whether the state has maximized disposal through other means, including barging.

The panel voted to reconvene an advisory group that had earlier worked with the DEP on reviewing its options for managing Piney Point.

Coram said the DEP's hands have been tied by rainfall 11 inches above normal this summer. The excess rain wiped out many of the gains made in lowering the Piney Point water level earlier this year.

The extra water dumped into Bishop Harbor will be treated with lime, which significantly lowers -- but doesn't eliminate -- pollution, including nitrogen that can lead to algae growth and loss of vital sea grass.

At times, the discharges could reach 2 million gallons within 30 hours.

With normal rainfall, the increased discharges would allow one of four water storage compartments at Piney Point to be closed in November, Coram said. If above average rain falls, the timetable could slip into December.

The DEP now says it believes the ecosystem can handle increased nitrogen loads from the latest dumping plan.

About 74 million gallons have been dumped in the Gulf by a barge. Under a federal permit, the Gulf dumping must end by Nov. 30.

Coram said the state doesn't plan to try to extend that deadline. He also said there are also "logistical problems" with trying to add another barge to increase the amount dumped at sea.
